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Illuminating...

Superb photo from Phillip Island and Cal Crutchlow coming into the light at a circuit that held such fond memories for the Brit last October. Signs were positive for Honda at the second fastest track on the calendar

Photo by CormacGP



MotoGP





Re-finding the margin...

Eli Tomac notched win number three of the Monster Energy AMA Supercross series with spoils on Ryan Dungey's homeground in Minneapolis. The Kawasaki man is now the most prolific rider this season after seven rounds but still sits 24 points away from the reigning number one

Photo by Rich Shepherd



AMA-SX

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London jaunt...

Very fitting that Dakar winner Sam Sunderland generated a slew of interest with his 'London Lap' last weekend as the first British winner of the Dakar. The 27 year old can now look to the FIM Cross-County Rallies World Championship starting in Abu Dhabi in just over a month

Photo by KTM



DAKAR







Ready for the big boys?

Could Rockstar Energy IceOne Husqvarna's Max Anstie be one of the surprise acts at Qatar for the MXGP opener this weekend? The Brit has previous form at Losail and seems to have adapted quickly to the FC450. In this issue we attempt to answer some of the hot questions before the series launch on Saturday night

Photo by Husqvarna Racing/Bavo Swijgers

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MINNEAPOLIS

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450SX winner: Eli Tomac, Kawasaki

250SX East Coast winner: Joey Savatgy, Kawasaki





SUPERCROSS: MINNEAPOLIS

By Steve Matthes
Photos by Simon Cudby/Rich Shepherd

WHILE ELI TOMAC BOUNCED BACK FROM DALLAS DISAPPOINTMENT THERE ARE ALREADY MURMURS IN THE PRESS OF REIGNING CHAMPION RYAN DUNGEY NEGOTIATING SOME FORM OF 'SLUMP'. THE KTM MAN WAS FITTINGLY AND DESERVING FETTLER AT HIS HOME ROUND LAST WEEKEND BUT SEEMED TO HAVE NO ANSWER FOR THE KAWASAKI RACER OR EVEN HIS OWN TEAMMATE IN THE FORM OF A CHARGING MARVIN MUSQUIN. STEVE MATTHES RUMINATES ON THE TOPIC AND ALSO LOOKS AT THE 250SX EAST OPENER

TOMAC FIRES BACK TO '17 TRIPLE

Round seven of the Monster Energy Supercross series (we're almost half-way...really?) took place in Minneapolis, Minnesota a place the series hasn't visited in four years and for only the third time in twelve years after being a staple of the championship for over a decade. Hometown hero Ryan Dungey of the Red Bull KTM team was properly feted throughout the night and although he didn't win, the crowd didn't seem to care all that much. They were stoked to see him.

As well, the 250SX East series kicked off with a night that was predictable when it came to the top of the box but after that, we saw some surprises and one rider that had title hopes smashed right at round one.

In the big boy class it was Monster Energy Kawasaki's Eli Tomac dominating all day long whether it was practice or the main event in capturing his third win in the last four races to gain five points on Dungey for the title. With the track soft and breaking down, Tomac took some big chances early to sprint away and used his outdoor motocross form in some of the corners to at first slowly pull clear from Dungey and then widen that gap even more after the first 6-7 laps.



Last week in Dallas Tomac was forced to pull into the mechanic's area for front brake repairs and lost a sure podium spot to that issue. It's going to be tough for the #3 to recover from that race, his early season results and leapfrog two riders in the standings but he's doing everything he can right now to try.

'That was a really tough race tonight. The track had a lot of crazy lines and was really tough. I felt like we did a lot of laps,' said Tomac. 'I'm glad to get back on our feet after last week [finishing 15th] and get back to where we were the weeks before that.'

Last week he won his first ever 450SX in rather easy fashion but this week, Red Bull KTM's Marvin Musquin might have rode even better. The Frenchman came from around tenth or so early-on and got faster through the main event. Musquin used his whoop jumping technique to great fashion as well as adapt to an ever-changing track to not only get on the podium but catch and pass, and gap, Dungey. What a story this is turning out to be as the two points Marv sliced from Dungey narrowed the gap to sixteen. Musquin has hauled five podiums and two ninth place finishes so far. #25, usually second fiddle in his career to the big stars, is starting to figure this stuff out.



As far as Dungey is concerned, he'll take the finish in front of his home crowd and move on but his recent rides have to be a bit concerning for him.

'We were pushing it, Eli [Tomac] was going good,' said Dungey. 'We were right there, but then I [had a slight miscue] and he took off. I made some [more] mistakes and Marvin [Musquin] was there to capitalize. It was a tough night, but we made the most of it and got on the podium.'

SUPERCROSS: MINNEAPOLIS



Musquin showing the kind of style that has taken him to second in the championship and real title contention in just his second 450SX term



SUPERCROSS: MINNEAPOLIS

Dungey was fourth last week, got caught and passed this week (when's the last time that happened?) and three races ago gave up a big lead to Tomac to lose by quite a bit. Yeah, we understand that 99% of the racers of the world would love to have Dungey's "problem" but this is as big of a slump by the defending champion as we've seen in a while. Publicly he's putting on a brave face and saying the right things but something's 'off' with him.

Honda's Cole Seely celebrated a nice second place last week and looked to at least be able to land on the box again when he pulled the holeshot in the main event but he went down and so did any hope of that podium.

'It was a bummer for sure. Any time you get a holeshot and throw it away like that it's a bummer,' Seely told me afterwards. 'I was just screaming at myself inside my helmet, but it is what it is.'



'I just lost the front end. I think what upset the bike the most was the turn before it we were down to the plywood. So I came off that a little slick landing, and then just washed the bike out. I got a bar to the leg. I actually snapped my knee brace. But I picked it up and was able to come back to fifth. I was really 'off' all night. I think I didn't really have a good flow. I was kind of fighting the track all night. I don't know – the track had so much floor space and I feel like they tightened it up so much. I think they could have done a little bit better with the layout.'

More on the track in my blog but safe to say after talking to a lot of the riders and being there myself, the Feld track crew would like a mulligan for this weekend's race.



The 250SX East series went off with the winner telling me that he wasn't happy with his riding, pretty much every rider admitting that they were nervous and TLD KTM's Alex Martin crashing out and saying goodbye to any title hopes he had.

'We started off, I don't want to say rusty, but just [with] jitters. It's like Anaheim 1 for us, so a lot of little mistakes. Rushing areas where we shouldn't rush. Just little things. As the day went on I felt bike setup got better. I didn't personally feel better,' said the winner Joey Savatgy to me after the race where he passed surprise early leader Jordon Smith and struck the first blow in the series continuing Monster Pro Circuit's resurgence with Justin Hill winning everything on the west side.

Smith would get a second after a rough start to his day and Rockstar Husqvarna's Zach Osborne, the fastest rider all day long would get third after hitting neutral and tipping over while in second. There was a big crash in the second turn that hurt a lot of riders including Osborne and Adam Cianciarulo but benefited others like Smith and GEICO Honda's RJ Hampshire.

Osborne has probably never looked better indoors than he did in Minnesota. The veteran rider has never won a 250SX main event and joined the Aldon Baker training program this off-season with Dungey, Jason Anderson and Musquin. He looks as fit as he's ever been and afterwards, despite the third, seemed very confident and happy about where he's at.

'It felt good to come out swinging and be right in the thick of things. Fastest kind of all day long and just to be in the hunt. To fall down in the main and still get third and be 1.5 seconds out of winning is pretty good,' said Osborne afterwards. 'So I'm taking a lot of positives from the day. Obviously the fall was not ideal.'

Savatgy's the favorite going in but watch out for Osborne as he seems to be the most impressive rider coming out of round one. Hampshire was fourth and Cianciarulo, in his first supercross in two years was fifth coming from around tenth. 'I think my whole night was determined by my start as I had to roll the triple. I'd never single-single-singled a triple before in a race and I did it tonight,' said the always-enlightening Cianciarulo. 'I think by the time I was going by the mechanics area, Joey or whoever was going into the whoops that first lap. So just right there it kind of wasn't good, but we stayed on two wheels. A couple guys had terrible nights. Alex Martin had a terrible night. So it's a bummer. I don't like getting fifth. I'd rather be on the box, but we're fine. Justin Hill got fifth at the first round.'

'It wasn't a terrible day. Listen, I've been off supercross for two years. I'm not stupid, but also even the heat race is six laps. But I feel like my speed's pretty good. My goal is to win. I want to win. You can only milk the "coming back" thing for so long. I'm not here to be a fifth-place guy. So I like to win.'



GEICO Honda's Christian Craig, who's got former AMA SX, MX and GP winner David Vuillemin helping him out, looked good all day, won his heat race convincingly and then got a terrible start in the main. That wasn't that bad as he probably could've come back to a fifth or so but then he crashed onto the pavement and that was it for him.

So we move onto Atlanta, then Daytona, where Ricky Carmichael famously once said the series doesn't start until we leave the speedway and after that race, we'll know if this Dungey slump is for real or not. One thing for sure is the momentum right now in this series is all green and wears the #3.





Zach Osborne is hardly the spring chicken in the 250 East region but his speed and confidence combined with the new training regime means '17 has to be regarded as his best shot at making the supercross chronicles yet

12, 2017

Savatgy gets right down to business and after a gripping first 250SX Main. After talk of 'crisis' over the past two years at Pro Circuit the team are now back in their usual nestling spot at the head of both 250SX competitions. Davi Millsaps (right) experienced a small revival of fortunes in Minneapolis





SUPERCROSS: MINNEAPOLIS





16 DAKARS UNDEFEATED

Winning once might be down to luck, but with 16 consecutive victories, KTM's Dakar domination is anything but circumstantial. With the READY TO RACE attitude and a massive team effort, British KTM Factory rider Sam Sunderland won the 2017 Dakar Rally, extending KTM's undefeated record. Congratulations to Sam and the team for this outstanding performance!

KTM



100%

Springtime collection for 100% and that means a raft of new designs and colours for the Racecraft (premium goggle) and the Accuri with the liveries easily visible every Saturday night in stadiums thanks to the likes of Marvin Musquin, Copper Webb and co. The **Racecraft** boasts anti-fog coated lexan lenses with the company's handy (and longstanding) shape conformity across the range. The lens system uses a nine point retention fixing, which is the highest amount in the industry. Patent pending air intake design combines with the multi-purpose foam and a box containing another lens (mirrored models) and a bag of tear-offs, not to mention a microfiber bag, are other appealing traits. High function, minimal but very modern aesthetics: 100% are keeping at the front of the game.





RUNDOWNS & COMEDOWNS...

By Steve Matthes

One thing that we've seen with the new timed races format that Feld Motorsports put into supercross this year (besides the riders on the track more) is that the actual race tracks seem unable to handle the extra laps. The heat and semi races are usually about the same as they were before (old heat format was 8 laps for 450SX and 6 for 250SX) but the mains have been longer for the most part. Not that much at most of the races in 2017 but six extra laps this past weekend in Minneapolis and last in Dallas.

And whether it's the amount of dirt on the track itself or the lack of time to fix the track or a combination of both, the course are suffering. Ruts that are right down to the concrete (or plywood depending on the stadium) induce wheel-spin up the faces of jumps, the tops of the jumps are beat up and more and more riders are out there just trying to survive instead of racing forward.

'The ruts starts in the turn, apexes, it's down to the concrete. It wouldn't have lasted throughout the night. It was actually down to the floor in a couple spots. Added to the slick dirt, we were also riding on concrete,' Honda's Cole Seely told me after Dallas about attempting a tricky rhythm section.

I'm in full agreement to try the longer main events, after all with the ticket prices going up, the fans need to see the stars of the sport more but halfway into this experiment, some of the riders are more worried about just clearing the jumps instead of racing. Stay tuned.

Chad Reed's in a slump right now the likes of which he's never really had before. Maybe back in 2010 when he joined Monster Energy Kawasaki, got hurt at round two and then came back for some supercrosses late in the year in which he mostly rode around. This season, outside of a terrific ride in Glendale where he finished second and made us all think that he was back, Reed's been struggling to find momentum. Of course, a DNF caused by a smashed water pump at round one and a DNF from a transmission issue two weeks ago hasn't helped him out but he just hasn't had his usual speed outside of one race. In Minneapolis he got a bad start, crashed and finished way back. Before his transmission broke in Dallas he was outside the top ten and not really moving forward. His starts have not been good this year and that's been a major culprit to the point where the Yamaha guys are trying everything they can with data and clutch packs to help him get up front.

22's track record means you can't push the panic button just yet but I have to admit, having seen Reed his entire career, I can't remember a time where he was this far off the pace. Maybe a start changes everything and Reed picks up but I've always believed that part of pulling starts is mental and if you know you don't have the speed to run up front, you don't get the start. No one, least of all Chad himself, wants to go out like this so either these results get better or Reed might pack it in and call it a career. He's too proud to keep doing what he's been doing.



JGR Suzuki's Justin Barcia came back in Minneapolis and looked ok but from his usual form as some crashes held him back. It'll be interesting to see how Barcia, in his last year of his deal with JGR, adapts to the new Suzuki and gets back to his old self. His teammate, Weston Peick, looked much improved on yellow before hurting himself and being out for the year. Barcia's got a lot riding on this switch and a pre-season injury didn't help things. Can he get back to his old levels that we haven't seen in supercross for a while? That remains to be seen but he's got to be supremely motivated to stay in his same salary range in 2018 and beyond. A rumor that appears to have a bit of legs is Barcia heading to the MXGP series for '18 if, (that's an IF) he can't get a deal to his liking in America. Something that seems believable because of Justin expressing some interest in racing in Europe at some point in his career.

All's quiet on the James Stewart front for now but we do know he's been sourcing some Honda parts and if he comes back, he'll be with brother Malcolm on the Ride365/Seven team. So maybe one of the most decorated riders the sports ever seen comes out a time or two for some races but I wouldn't say from the people I talk to that it's a guarantee. I hope if he does come back to racing, at whatever capacity, he's fit and ready to go because that James Stewart we saw last year wasn't anywhere near what he used to be.





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MXGP 2017

QATAR QUESTIONS

THE FIFTH GRAND PRIX OF QATAR IN A ROW WILL THROW THE LIGHTS ON MXGP THIS WEEKEND AND A SPECIAL ISSUE OF OTOR WILL BE PUBLISHED TUESDAY AFTER THE MXGP AND MX2 (NO LADIES THIS YEAR) MOTOS AT LOSAIL. IN THE BUILD-UP TO THE ELECTRIC START BUTTON BEING THUMBED ON MOTOCROSS FOR 2017, WE DECIDED TO TACKLE SOME OF THE BURNING QUESTIONS THAT MIGHT HOVER AROUND THE SERIES AS THE FLIGHT CASES BEGIN TO ARRIVE AT THE LOSAIL GATES...

By Adam Wheeler
Photos by Ray Archer

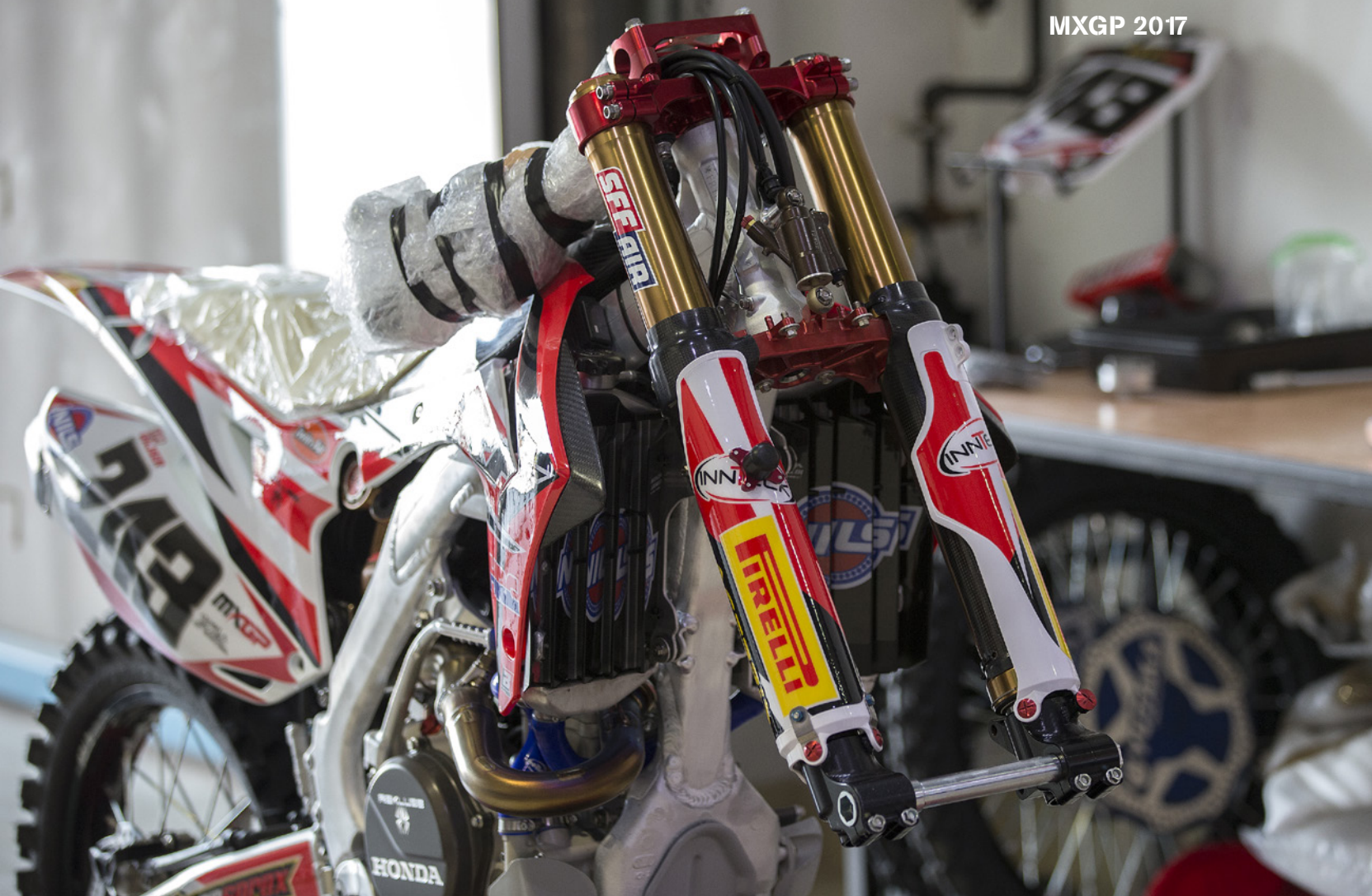


WILL HERLINGS BE FIT?

A typically upbeat communication from KTM revealed that the MX2 World Champion and an authentic 'alpha' among the premier class this season had undergone surgery to his hand last week (fourth metacarpus) and should be at Losail and ready to make his MXGP debut. The extent of the injury, its effects, the aftermath and how Herlings' mindset will be for arguably his hardest Grand Prix test yet are factors probably only known to very few. Shaun Simpson broke his fifth metacarpus in Spain last summer and ended up missing two Grands Prix. Bone breaks can be very particular and while Herlings' crash in the final round of the Italian Championship was pretty brutal there is a tone of 'downplay' to the gravity of the injury. While expectations always swirl around the #84 simply because of his speed and potential

he still probably sits behind Cairoli in terms of title hedge-betting from the Austrians. Yes, Romain Febvre and Tim Gajser made instant impacts on their debuts (and this brings its own form of pressure for Jeffrey and his fondness for statistics...especially following Gajser in claiming back-to-back titles in consecutive years) but these were high exceptions to the norm. Like everybody else KTM will be excited to see what Herlings can do on the 450SX-F but they know that have one of the very fastest riders in the world – at 22 years old - in their stable. It won't be the first time that Herlings enters the Grand Prix of Qatar with a few small question marks hovering around like sand flies but don't be surprised if he somehow delivers by hook or by crook.





WILL GASJER DOMINATE AGAIN?

On Thursday in Doha last year MX2 World Champion Tim Gajser talked to the press and was keen and curious to see where he would fit into the MXGP running. By the early hours of Sunday morning and an unchallenged charge to a 1-1 we were all the wiser. Among the riders there was little surprise that #243 had started so emphatically; the results of Romain Febvre in 2015 had already exhausted a lot of eyebrows. Gajser and the CRF450RW seemed a perfect fit. What's the difference this time? The Slovenian has certainly lost the 'rookie' element of the unexpected although he could well set the bar for intensity and speed once again. He has a new motorcycle to develop and had a winter slightly disrupted by injury that took the shinier edge from his 2016 term. He was beaten by Cairoli in the Italian Cham-

pionship outings (not much of a firm guide it has to be said) and also has slightly different circumstances for 2017 as part of the official HRC framework where the microscope of his work on and off the track will be turned up a notch. If Tim performs anything like he did twelve months ago at Losail then he will be the man to catch; but he will have extra duties and responsibility as reigning champion as well as the knowledge that somewhere in that #243 design sits the heavy weight of a #1. Gajser hit the ground sprinting at Qatar 2016 with results and a shot of confidence that arguably established his title contention from the very first laps of a long year. It will be sensational if he can repeat the strength of this statement and, ominously for his rivals, he is also older, a little wiser, a little stronger.



WHAT DOES TONY CAIROLI'S EXCELLENT PRE-SEASON FORM MEAN?

That the Sicilian is healthy, happy and perhaps ready to shirk some of his frustrations of 2016 and set the pointer firmly on a ninth crown. Tony described last year as one of his worst: quite a claim when he finished second in the standings and was one of just two riders to score points in every single moto. Injured in 2015, injured prior to 2016, the lion has been firmly prodded for the past two seasons and the sight of Gajser able to catch and pass the #222 with apparent ease in cases such as Frauenfeld and the Grand Prix of Switzerland won't have sat well with the 31 year old. Perhaps time to roar then. Cairoli may have claimed the ill-fated Superfinal format in Qatar in 2013 but he didn't win the overall Grand Prix, which means that Losail is still virgin territory for the KTM man. Very few riders have looked more able or ready from appearances so far in 2017 and considering his pedigree Tony would be worth a small flutter for Qatar.

WHO WILL SURPRISE IN MXGP AND MX2?

New faces in the premier class (aside from another KTM) involve former MX2 Grand Prix winners Max Anstie (the third part of the Rockstar Energy IceOne Husqvarna trio) and Arnaud Tonus (Wilvo Yamaha) while the likes of Ken de Dycker (JTech Suzuki Valenti) makes a Grand Prix return after the better part of two years estranged through injury. Former European Championship race winner Maxime Desprey is another MXGP debutant and Qatar will be the first time we see Valentin Guillod on a 2017 CRF450R. Aside from the usual names it is perhaps Anstie who could turn a few heads. The Brit already gained positive reviews on the FC450 in his podium ride at the Hawkstone Park International and should have gone 1-1 at Losail three years ago with mastery of the desert dirt – in particular the vast quad adjacent to the finish line jump where he was one of only two 250cc riders to complete the leap. It's harder to make a judgement in MX2 but watch for recently-turned sixteen year old Jorge Prado to fly and Husqvarna's Thomas Kjer Olsen – the 2016 EMX250 Champion – has also been quietly gathering praise in the off-season. Australia's Hunter Lawrence could make a Suzuki debut to remember and ape Dean Ferris's Qatar splash from four years ago. Keep a watch out for Adam Sterry on Dylan Ferrandis' Kawasaki, Ben Watson returning to action after a year away with a broken foot and another 'comeback' in the form of Julien Lieber, who gathered a garland at Qatar in 2015 in second place.

MXGP 2017





IS THIS METAL GATE GOING TO MAKE MUCH OF A DIFFERENCE?

This one has to be a 'wait and see'. No doubt several riders will be enthused about the new start procedure and others will be left rubbing their chins. Mock gates across Europe will have been built this winter to replicate the conditions teams will find at Losail and then throughout the calendar but it's clear that an optimum set-up between tyre choice and electronics and traction control will play a part and then minor changes, such as damp desert air (it actually rained two years ago in

Losail) will come into play. We've yet to hear one MXGP rider gripe about the abolishment of gate prep and the chance to carve their own ruts but for a good few start practice or refinement will be one of the first boxes to be circled when it comes to Sunday debriefs. At the very least in Losail we'll see a host of new pre-race preparation routines, probably some fidgeting and boredom and a good chance to see who is handling the immediate pre-race nerves.



MXGP 2017

WHO WILL WIN MX2?

Put the entry list on a table and drop a pin onto it: this one will be damn hard to call. Jeffrey Herlings won every single MX2 Qatar Grand Prix, including 2015 when he was barely in full race trim after complications in the winter with his femur and a stomach infection and then in 2016 in a comeback from the dislocated hip that dropped the Dutchman to his lowest ebb. Dylan Ferrandis was the only rider to stop Herlings from a total clean sweep and the Frenchman just posted an impressive sixth position in his AMA 250SX debut last weekend. On a horsepower hungry course and some of the faster stretches of Losail the factory KTMs of Pauls Jonass and Jorge Prado have to be in contention as well as Brian Bogers (and thus the Husqvarnas) but then also don't rule out the Kawasakis and Yamahas of Paturel. Considering the form of 2016 and conviction that his starting prowess has increased then championship runner-up Jeremy Seewer has to be something of a favourite with Suzuki hunting their first Grand Prix win since 2010 (Ken Roczen in Italy) with the RM-Z250. His toughest foe could well be Thomas Covington; the American snared a top three result at Losail on his Grand Prix debut three years ago and is also the only rider in MX2 with Grand Prix winning experience. From thirty-two riders on the entry list only ten know the view from an MX2 podium. Unless Covington rules the evening then this Saturday will be a landmark for one of the group.

D

FEATURE

WILL THIS BE THE LAST MXGP AT QATAR?

See Blog.





THINGS GUARANTEED TO BE SEEN AT LOSAIL...

Team and bike profile photos in pitlane, a long line of riders having their patience tested for TV graphics and intros, a busy queue in the sole catering tent at the circuit, interest in Honda's electric start among all the pristine bikes sharing the Losail pit garages, condensation running like rain from pit box roofs, discretely dressed Monster Energy girls and some inventive ways of transportation along the pitlane to the circuit and back (previous modes including skateboards, bicycles, scoots).





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A focus on Answer's Elite gear, and the mid-price point in their principal riding collection. The brand will become much more noticeable in MXGP in the coming days thanks to their new association with Red Bull KTM and the Limited Edition Halo get-up is currently one of the freshest looking sets in Supercross. We still quite like the Blue/Red option (also shown here) but the Halo is something a little different...and Answer's mid-range offering is already better than most other brands' best. Expect to pay under 200 dollars for the full shirt, pants and gloves outfit.

For more colours and designs have a look at:

www.answer racing.com





GO EAST YOUNG MAN...

By Adam Wheeler

For half a decade Grand Prix motocross has opened a new season in Losail, Qatar (on the permanent track, just outside T1 for anybody curious) and for what has tended to be a slightly surreal occasion. There is hype and excitement at a new campaign, a degree of contentedness in the paddock with teams able to swap winter clothes for summer and work in clean and organised conditions thanks to the permanent facilities but then the Grand Prix of Qatar is also an event that takes place in front of a skeletal crowd and something of a vacuum of atmosphere; oddly appropriate with the desert setting.

2017 should be the last in a five-year contract between the QMMF and Youthstream and – so far – there is little indication as to whether MXGP will continue at Losail. The federation, circuit and powers-that-be in Qatar have considerable resources – more than perhaps any club or facility in the championship – and have been able to fashion a venue with a customised lighting set-up and a dedicated track crew. Arriving to Losail is easy, the paddock set-up more than comfortable, the teams seem to enjoy the possibility to exist for several days in decent hotels and the climate is agreeable. For Youthstream the contract with the QMMF is suitably lucrative and puts the series on the same plinth as MotoGP and WorldSBK, with the Qataris enjoying that privileged ‘first race on the calendar slot’ that they have paid for with MotoGP since 2007.

Will MXGP continue in Qatar? Should it continue? Undoubtedly talks will have taken place and could well continue this week in Doha. Unless budgets have to be cut then QMMF should

have little reason to terminate their association with MXGP. Losail is home to other motorcycle series’, as mentioned, and while they run track days, kart events and pop up for private use (as seen with the launch of KTM’s recent Super Duke 1290R) the agenda does not seem to be overflowing. One recently promoted activity was for Ladies Training days for walks, runs and cycling around the asphalt; scrapping motocross would be a waste of what Losail has to offer.

“If one of the first press conferences of 2017 is a renewal of the deal to keep MXGP at Losail I believe it would be a positive thing...”

In terms of promotion it is another FIM motor-sport that provides a window. Qatar – already a home to top-flight sporting events in tennis, team sports and equestrian – is trying to pitch itself as the gateway from the west to the east and the presence of Qatar Airways ensures that Doha is an accessible city and increasingly a hub for long haul connections to the other side of the world.

What counts against the Grand Prix is the fact that not many people (even in the region it could be argued) are bothering to take flights or drive through the Losail gates (the tickets cost 25 euros with paddock entry as well). The



MotoGP fixture is the lowest-attended meeting of the year (around 10,000), which means expectations have to be realistic for motocross but it is slightly dismaying to see the throng at the first round of the year remain decidedly slim (maybe questions of promotion in Doha have to be asked?). The QMMF – who have made political overtones of wanting to promote health and exercise in their country and have to be one of the most proactive, bullish and unashamedly proud nations in their pursuit of bringing sport, athletes and world class facilities to their land just 120km in length - also spoke of local motorcycling talent being able to use the Grand Prix as a source of inspiration and the hopes of one day seeing a Qatari rider hitting world championship level. The federation have run their own team with this goal in MotoGP for almost a decade and motocross is an evidently an easier route for any young racer to consider a career or progress.

As I've written in past Blogs, the case of Latvia is a clear example of a country investing in Grand Prix and a sport and reaping the benefits over time with more and more riders breaking into MX2 and seeing the professionalism and dedication needed to get anywhere near the top.

Qatar, with just over 300,000 nationals and a daunting 2.6 million ex-pats in residency, according to the country's official Wiki page, boasts very little motocross tradition and is a mere babe in relation to the history found in other countries, particularly in Europe, but you cannot fault their efforts to want to get something going. Losail has served as a useful plat-

form for MXGP to then head further east and satisfy Asian fans of the sport. Indonesia is a large question mark but motocross will find a hungry audience in one of the craziest countries for motorcycle racing in that zone of the globe. For manufacturers it also covers an important market and re-affirms MXGP's status and reach as an FIM world championship. It actually says quite a lot for the structure of what the paddock finds in Losail that the comedown in the earthier and often challenging circumstances a week later in Thailand (two years in Pattaya, one in Nakhonchaisri, one in Suphan Buri) have been tricky to deal with. The new build in 2016 was publicly derided by Ben Townley. I genuinely hope that Indonesia hits the ground running.... even if the crew at Pangkal Pinang should be given leeway with their maiden event.

In an ideal world the Qataris would have to cope with a crowd ten times the size of what currently flocks into Losail for the opening foray of MXGP and the delicious treat of who is fastest, sharpest and keenest in the initial dash of a damn long year. They pretty much have every other aspect of a quality race meeting in their pocket. If one of the first press conferences of the 2017 Grand Prix is a renewal of the deal to keep motocross at Losail I believe it would be a positive thing for the series. It is then down to the promoters and the QMMF to continue work on ripening interest in the race, develop any fast national riders and keeping Qatar as part of the motocross map.



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FEATURE



JONATHAN REA

UNTAPPED: THE REA WAY

& THE KEY TO MOTORCYCLE RACING GLORY

By Adam Wheeler

Photos by Monster Energy/Andi Gordon/GeeBee Images

It's not every day you have to ferry a World Champion motorcycle racer around on the back of your scooter. 2015 and 2016 World Superbike conqueror Jonathan Rea is drawing looks courtesy of his heavily branded Arai race helmet as we weave around Barcelona traffic between photoshoot locations. Talk about an esteemed passenger...especially on two wheels. I might be carrying one of the fastest motorsport athletes in the world today but - gleaned through my conversations with Johnny - the truth is that the small bike would need to accommodate a couple more people to understand the reasons for his vast well of success.

Behind the speed, stats, achievements, rewards and sheer dominance there are four letters and two numbers that form very much the make-up of Jonathan Rea. Just skim through the (recently-turned) thirty year old's active social media channels and you'll frequently see the tag '#team65'. This is not only in reference to the staff of the Kawasaki Racing Team with which he has forged an almost unbeatable bond but to the small group of friends and, more essentially, his family consisting of wife Tatia and two young boys Jake and Tyler.

By himself, Rea is slight and with a frame that doesn't hint at the strength of a racer that can haul a Ninja ZX-10RR around tracks from Thailand to California as well as his beloved motocross bikes across terrain he often rides between bases in the Isle of Man and Tatia's native Australia. Rea still carries that aura of world champion. He is a strange blend of a humble, approachable family man from Larne, Northern Ireland to a confident and assured individual that has conquered his niche. He gives an impression of a contended person who knows he is at the very top of a game that is often fickle and always perilous.

We talk at the last Superbike test of 2016 at a dark and wet Jerez circuit in southern Spain and then catch-up again for a chat and photos during February in Barcelona - home of the

KRT team, based a rubber chunk from the road racing circuit just outside the Catalan city. Finally an afternoon coffee in the confines of the plush Hotel Silken Diagonal Barcelona, scene of the last batch of photos and the dwindling hours of a week in the country for Rea who has been training and motocrossing. He'll shortly fly to the family in Australia as the clock ticks furiously towards the launch of 2017 WorldSBK and where he could become the first rider in the history of the sport to own three titles in a row.

Jonathan Rea is a name familiar in motorcycle racing circles: son of a TT winning racer, Supersport, Superbike and Honda stalwart until his Kawasaki transfer at the end of 2014, startling MotoGP wild-card appearances in 2012 but for some reason his face or passport didn't fit to allow entry into Grand Prix on terms he was happy with. Upon the union with Kawasaki many in-the-know predicted an eruption of form and the experts were right. He only dropped away from the Superbike podium three times in twenty-six races last year and won fourteen from twenty-six in 2015. It has been a 'greenwash'.

Awards, praise and recognition have flowed accordingly. His profile has accelerated and he is one of Great Britain's most recognised 'motor-sportsmen'. Even through the brief moments in his company it is easy to see that the meld of father, husband, racer, Kawasaki representative and figurehead for a sport leaves very little room in his life for anything else. He embraces his status and is fan of Instagram and Twitter. Rea might come across as very modest but has no trouble in existing in that public sphere of an achiever.

Rea has been watched and observed for over a decade as he scaled the racing ladder but his career and life has bubbled furiously in the last couple of years. His World Championships and peak performance coming at a time when he married and became a father. A co-incidence?



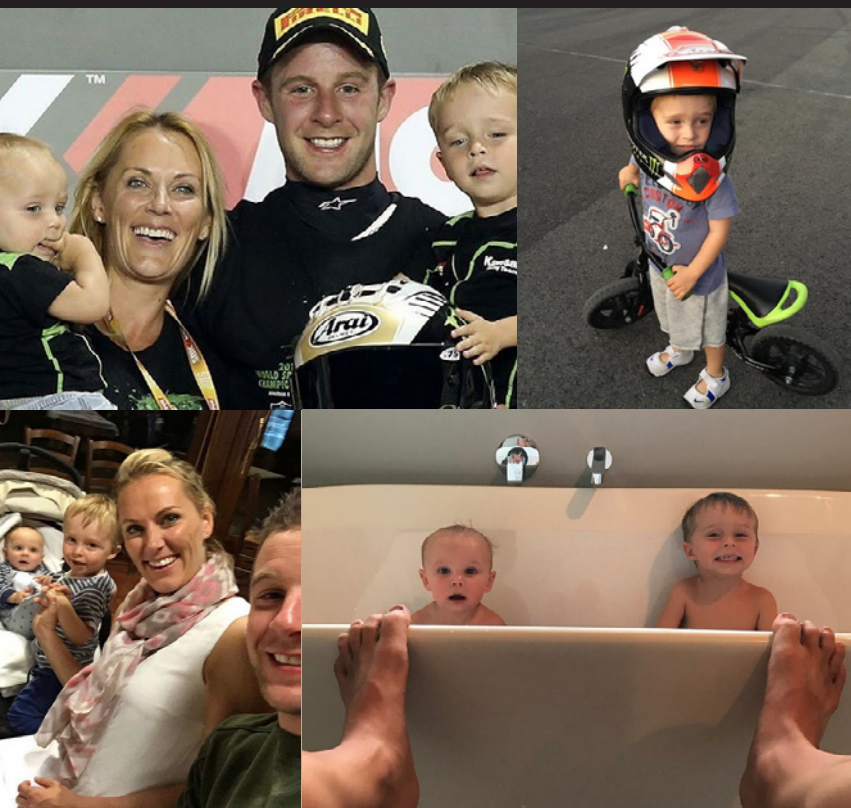
Rea has no trouble ruminating on the suggestion himself. It was thus important to gain insight from the personal and professional sides through Crew Chief Pere Riba (a former Supersport peer) and Tatia to see how the fabric of #Team65 is really stretching and why he will be a formidable force once again over the next ten months as lap records tumble and point hauls swell.

Life must have become more hectic over the past two years and then living on the Isle of Man...it seems like a very motorcycle orientated existence...

Sometimes yes, to be honest. Especially now with a family. Family is really important to me and in a way I'm lucky that I don't have to ride every day and we do [just] thirteen rounds a season. Our team manager is very clever to shield us from too many PR activities during the year because performance is key. Generally through the season I get to spend a lot of time at home on the Isle of Man and I love being there because I get left alone, people

understand and respect what I do and are big fans of the sport. It is a very humble place and nobody bothers you. It [life] is still exciting for me and even more so now with kids because we get to travel to the races together and I get to share the best moments of my career together, which is so cool. It means a lot. Leon Haslam did it a year before me with his daughter and I remember looking at him and thinking 'that must be tough' and seeing kids in the hospitality and thinking 'this isn't the place to bring your family...' but when I had kids it gave me a completely different balance in life. I don't think twice when I put my helmet on... but when I take it off they are key people and I need them to be there. It is a massive sacrifice to be at the front of this sport and they are all-in with me and I'm lucky to have an amazing wife that understands and 'gets' it and is supportive. Doing this job is so much better with them.

@jonathanrea



I've heard some motocrossers say that you wouldn't take your girlfriend, family or friends with you to an office, and the same work principal applies to race weekends but if you look at photos of you then Jake and Tyler are in the pit box, they are around. It clearly seems to work for you...

Yeah...I think it might be something that would be frowned upon in the Grand Prix paddock. When you have your first kid there is a part of you thinking 'how is this going to affect my job?' and you can imagine it must be every team manager's worst nightmare to have that 'my girlfriend or wife is pregnant' conversation! But I really do think the proof is in the pudding. Look at the GP guys like Casey [Stoner] or here with Tom or myself or Haslam being Dads...the old Enzo Ferrari [saying] that having a kid means losing half a second is bullshit. It is just how you manage it. My family are very

much part of me and I'm lucky that I am part of a team that understands that and welcomes them. If you go upstairs in the hospitality then you'll see my table is covered in hand prints because young Tyler eats with his fingers and there'll be Bolognese everywhere! But Tony and the team really welcome them and have made high chairs for the kids so I'm very lucky. The worse thing for me mentally is to be away from them. I'll be here [at the track] and there'll be at home and I'll hear that Jake is not sleeping or has a bad cough or Tatia, my wife, has been up all night. I cannot help them because I'm 6000 miles away or whatever. If they are here then I can chip-in a bit. Every morning at the test I've been taking both boys to breakfast which lets Tatia have a shower and get up. Of course it does take a lot of effort and mental energy away from you and sometimes it does get on top of you because I used to have a lot of guilt about my training; not that I'm neglecting it but maybe my recovery. I'll be in the gym and doing my programme or on the bicycle and doing 80Ks, and instead of coming home and having a massage or a sauna I come in and play Dad. I probably don't get the recovery I should but I feel that I have a good balance at the moment. What I am doing seems to be working so I don't want to change it too much!

It sounds like a win-win; the family are there to enjoy the good times but then you also have the best support system in place if things don't go quite so well...

Yeah and Pere [Riba, Crew Chief] would be a good guy to ask about that because I'm sure he dreads when I come to the track by myself! He knows I'll be spending more time in the garage, more time asking questions and creating problems that are maybe not there compared to leaving the garage after giving my feedback and forgetting about the session. Of course being able to do that anyway is only possible when you have incredible guys around you that you can trust 100%. That lackadaisical approach only works when you have an amazing crew that you can lean on.

A high-action photograph of Jonathan Rea leaning into a turn on his Kawasaki Ninja ZX-10R motorcycle. The bike is white with vibrant green and black accents, featuring prominent Monster Energy and Elf logos. Rea is wearing a white and red Arai helmet, a black and white racing suit with Kawasaki and Elf branding, and red and white gloves. The background is a blurred green field, suggesting speed.

JONATHAN REA

"I THINK IT IS SO COOL THAT IN THE LAST THREE YEARS I'VE GOT MARRIED, HAD BOTH MY LITTLE BOYS AND I HAVE TWO WORLD CHAMPIONSHIPS TO MY NAME. I SEE MY FAMILY AS A HUGE PART AND PACKAGE OF THAT SUCCESS BECAUSE THEY HAVE PUT SO MUCH SACRIFICE INTO ME BEING AN ATHLETE. THEY ARE 'ALL IN' WITH ME AND FOR ME..."



Pere Riba smiles when we recount Jonathan's words at the Kawasaki Racing Team presentation in the unusual confines of the Cinema Comedic in Barcelona. 'I don't like it when Tatia and the kids aren't there!' he concurs. 'Riders must be 100% concentrated on riding the bike. They don't need to be thinking about the inertia, the brakes, the throttle, engine or horsepower. They need to be focused on the braking points, opening the throttle and their feelings on the bike: this is the best way to be faster. If they are in the box too much they are thinking about the bike, the next rider or the teammate. If the family are there and the relationship is good then he is able to be 'on-off' and this is very positive.'

'When we know Tarsh is not coming with the kids – f**k – we talk with Ori [Oriol Pallarès, Chief Mechanic] about how we will handle it! My philosophy also is that at the top level everything is in the brain; the rider makes the difference. The rider is a leader and creates the atmosphere in the team, he makes the engineers happy and gives the right information for development.'

Riba and his staff were under no illusion as to Rea's abilities when he turned 'green'. 'His skills riding the bike mean that he is a top rider,' the former Supersport man says. 'In my opinion he could be a top, top athlete in MotoGP. His ability is crazy. He really 'talks' with the bike at all moments, going in and going out [of the turns] his feeling is always 99% and when he doesn't cross that limit it is amazing what he can do with a bike.'

They understood quickly that Jonathan required something of a unique environment. 'Some riders are cold. They are killers, very good, very fast and they don't need people around them or an arm around the shoulder, even in life, not just racing,' Riba suggests. 'Jonathan is a guy who needs that kind of warmth around him and he found it in this team. We are all close. Having a close relationship doesn't matter for some riders but for Jonathan it is important.'

'The personal life – the kids and Tarsh – give him a good footing for his job. I have a good relationship with Tarsh because I have known her for many years and she really understands this lifestyle and that's really important. She only brings positives to his life and sport, not any negatives. His whole package is very solid and strong. There is not one small part of his life that hinders him and if you put all of this together with the people around him in our team then I believe he has found another family and friends and believes 200% in our job.'

Riba might claim that a motorcycle racer is a leader of a team but it is starkly clear that Rea has discovered a set of personnel and peers at KRT that have helped him unearth those final clichéd percentage marks to turn from a good rider to an exceptional one. A competitor that is not only part of the record books but creating a hero of himself to coming generations, much in the same way that Carl Fogarty captured attention in the same discipline.

You won something twice and reached a state of accomplishment that most people can only dream of. Do you sometimes stop and think about it...

Hmmm, no, because I am in 'the bubble'. Because it is all happening 'now' and it is current. I think it will take until some real hard times or an injury or until I retire when I'll look back and - maybe - think 'I should have enjoyed that more...' When you are a kid you grow up and you want to be the best and you want to be world champion, whether it is motocross, MotoGP or whatever. I wanted to



be World Champion. I remember having a very philosophical conversation once with Carlos Checa's [2011 champ] assistant. We were all blind drunk but his words about me waiting for my time and my moment kinda sunk-in. This was around the time that Carlos was having his 'moment' in Superbike and was dominating everything and I recall thinking 'I want to be that guy [who's winning] so much...I want that feeling he has'. And then when you get it then it seems like something normal. I took everything I could and absorbed everything that Carlos Checa's assistant was saying about him that night...and now it is happening to me you don't remember being that guy that longed for the seasons I'm having or the race wins. So I'm in the bubble and it is hard to imagine not having it.

Is it frustrating that it could be so temporary though? That the new season's first race comes so quickly after the last one...

I know that and I have to make the most of it right now. I'm at the top of the tree and everyone in this paddock wants to be there and wants that No.1 plate. I'm well aware of it and every off-season I go away and try to do things even better. This is my time right now. Next year it could be somebody else's. I've achieved what I wanted to achieve to be honest. All I wanted to be was World Champion and I've done it twice. That doesn't suck any motivation out of me to roll off the gas or take things less seriously or not train as hard because my motivation is not about winning...it is the fear of being beaten and that makes me dig even deeper.

What about confidence? It must have risen and hit a peak in the last twenty-four months but how do you fight back from the low moments and the adversity? How do you get to the point where you can think about being world champion?

Confidence is key. I believe I can take an amateur and give him a set of instructions to be fast "brake here, do this with your body there,

hit this apex here and you'll be fast" and it doesn't necessarily matter about the talent level of this guy but if he has confidence, and believes in what you are saying then he'll be quick. What is so tough to accept about our sport is that confidence comes from the feeling with the bike; the feeling with suspension, tyres and it does change day-to-day to be honest and I think my biggest quality as a rider is that fact that I can switch off and don't necessarily think about riding the bike too much. I go back to my motorhome at night and I sleep like a baby. I don't think too much and I just get back on the bike the next day and try to create the same feeling and give myself that same set of instructions: I know what I have to do to be fast. If I'm not then there is a reason for it and then it becomes about working with your crew to figure that out. The biggest thing I have learnt at Kawasaki is about having good people in your corner. If you give good feedback to the engineers then they will know exactly the changes to make to return that good feeling. When that comes then you're confidence goes up again. It can be a bit of a vicious circle sometimes to get everything in line. I guess that is important with confidence is not to overthink sometimes. I've struggled in the past when I've had shit races and I've gone home and trained even harder and eaten better and come to the track and analyse even more...but then still have a shit day. Other times when I have stood back, taken a deep breath, slept it off and got up in the morning and eaten what I wanted – something like toast with peanut butter and jam or triple eggs or whatever – then I will go out and ride well. There is obviously a magic formula somewhere because you see some of the most talented riders in the world fighting with confidence sometimes. I've been there and gone through it. But I believe the more you can detach yourself and not take it so seriously then the better the result. I've been so hard on myself at times when things were going wrong and you don't know what to do; should I employ more people around me? Or change something with

my life? But I think you need to find that enjoyment factor and maybe take it a little less seriously and the magic will come...if it is going to come. Of course you need to be in a good team first with a good bike and most guys at the top level in this paddock have that around them.

You've just hit thirty: how do you feel about that?

No different, and I think that it helps that I have achieved what I wanted to in sport. Now it is about fun and winning as much as I can. As I said, I feel lucky: I'm in love with my wife, have a great relationship with my boys and I'm successful at work. I'm almost waiting for someone to pull the rug out from under me. The only difference with the birthday is that when you turn 29 only your mum and dad text you, at 30 I seemed to get a whole lot more!

"I ENJOY ACHIEVING LITTLE THINGS. JUST RIDING THE BIKE ISN'T SO SATISFYING BUT ACHIEVING THOSE THINGS ARE GREAT, LIKE A FAST LAP-TIME IN TESTING OR KNOWING YOU ARE HEADING IN THE RIGHT DIRECTION WITH DEVELOPMENT..."

Rea's enthusiasm for his family is utterly endearing and then some of his stories about appreciation or comps from firms like Oakley or Alpinestars and almost-VIP treatment allows his values and grounded roots to shine through. His background is so sodden with motorcycle racing (perhaps there was a youthful swagger at some point in his career but it seems hard to imagine) that the demands and criteria of his profession must seem like second-nature. It has to help when it comes to moving the rest of Team65 global.

All the travel, the stress, concentration and public visibility: is it perhaps a bit of an unusual lifestyle for the kids?

Yes and no. It is what I knew because I grew up with my Dad road racing, doing Isle of Man TTs and North-West 200s so I was Jake and Tyler at one time, with my little bicycle hanging out in paddocks. I had that same type of upbringing and I loved it. I think that's why I got into motorsport in the end because I saw the difference that winning and having a good weekend would make to my father and how happy he was. It was really infectious. When I started to ride I liked the bikes but I loved the winning and achieving stuff. When Dad had a good weekend he'd be super-happy and having beers with his friends and that vibe carried on until the next weekend. It is the same with Jake and - it is hard to believe - but if I have a tough race then he is pretty down on me: asking loads of questions like 'why didn't you win?!' He's only just turned three so I had a two-and-a-half year old last season telling me to go out and beat Tom [Sykes] and Chaz [Davies]. He watches the TV and understands it. It's kinda surreal...but he's 'in' it with me and I embrace that because it is part of me.

Do you have a harder edge to you - something perhaps you need in your profession - that perhaps you don't want him to see? Racing a motorcycle is hardly picking flowers...

I've had crashes before and he understands that this is sad...but I'm so lucky with my wife because she's such a balanced person and I have become like this. I think also my results over the last couple of years means that I haven't had too many of those major troughs where I've thrown toys out of the pram or hide some kind of nasty side. The hardest thing for me is neglecting them when I have to go off for things like long training rides or other events when I might miss the nursery run. I do what I can and my job is not 'normal', I get to spend a massive amount of time with my kids when so many people just get to see theirs when they get home and just before they go to bed.

I get to do my job with them...in a vacant way because on a race weekend I'm 'there' but in my brain I'm not really there. That's why my wife is amazing. I don't think I've really had to hide many personality traits of being an athlete from Jake at all. I believe it is a good thing bringing them up in this competitive environment, especially nowadays when there are so many controlling rules now about competition, schools and tests. I think not classifying kids is bullshit because the whole world is so competitive. Not [just] in sport but even if you go for a job interview and you don't have confidence to sell yourself then you are not going to get it. It is the same in all walks of life. My boys know the difference that being good at something can make and I hope that whatever they choose to do in life they can throw themselves into it and focus.

Understandably, Tatia Rea is a little tricky to get hold off. She's holding the fort in Australia and a house the Reas rent to make the most of the summer and the run-up to the last 2017 test and first race of the season. Jonathan has been fulfilling obligations in Europe and talks are timed at the beginning and end of the eleven-hour time zone difference. Tatia's experience in working for Honda in a marketing role in the UK has been invaluable in coping with the kind of circumstances that surround Rea as a professional rider. As a cornerstone of the family and mother of two, she's had to work out how to find a position around Kawasaki, her husband and the entire whirlwind to keep all parties happy and in sync...and appears to have aced it so far.

'I had worked for race teams so I know about the game and while we are there to support him I was never one to sit in the chair next to him or be in his face all the time,' she chats over Facetime once Jake and Tyler are tucked-up in bed. 'I think we have a good balance and we communicate well. There are times when I know we might be in the way or he needs some 'alone' time, and also moments when

he's put pressure on me to come to races but I'm feeling a bit burnt out because maybe it's four in a row. He'll be like 'Really? Are you going to miss one?!' but I have to look after us as well. When we are at the races he is with us, but I know he kinda isn't because he's in race mode and I don't expect anything different but it can be a big ask for us. If one of the kids is a bit sick it can be nice to be at home. However we also know this is a short 'window' when we get to be part of such a special time and part of his career and this helps us through if it gets a bit tough.'

'Having two small kids is hard anyway, then throw in the travelling and a sportsman who is trying to win a world championship,' she adds. 'Jonathan and I sorta give ourselves a pat on the back sometimes, people think it might be easy because they see you waving at the camera on a Sunday but it really isn't. We know its worth it and we put in the work at the track and personally and try to crack-on and not to moan about it. We know the reward is there at the end of it. That's how we run the programme.'

Handling two toddlers is already a full-time job. What about some of the weight Jonathan must bear at times? World level motorcycle racing is hardly a stress-free environment. 'We have quite a simple life and we don't really change our characters if we're at home or not. I think Jonathan is extraordinary the way he can move between being that sportsman, father and husband because he does all of it very well,' she explains. 'He doesn't like letting down any of those parts of his life and gives it 100% and I know there are guys that don't even give that to their girlfriends at the track never mind two kids and a wife. I think I help him understand that too and I don't put pressure on; I know when I need to kick him up the arse to take the rubbish out and when to leave him the-hell-alone to crack-on and do his job. It is just about communication and understanding.'

So the placid Rea is pretty much a constant? 'He does get annoyed about stuff but I don't think I have ever seen him lose his head about anything,' she offers. 'He is pretty controlled with his emotions and it takes a lot for him to get pissed off. If he does have a wobble about someone or something or an incident on track then he can let it go pretty quickly. He is a good person but he knows the game too and when not to make a big deal about something. He has close friends or people around him where he can be himself but he also knows when to put on his PR head and to say the right thing. I always think he is like that with my parents! When he first met them he put on this charming face and won them over and then the next time he sat in the corner with his phone because that's what he wanted to do! He knows when to turn it on and off!'

2015 and 2016 might have passed in a blur of elation and energy (and fatigue) but there is a part of Tatia that is also a little puzzled at just how well the forces and events have collided to spectacular effect in their lives and how the Rea family dynamic has contributed to the spoils. 'It surprises me because when I first met Jonathan I did not think he would be the type that would want a baby in the motorhome and I think he even mentioned that to me at one point! And I thought 'that's OK, it is something we can deal with at the time...' but it just seems to work and it actually seems to make him go faster on the bike. Maybe it's because he is not just doing it for himself. It motivates him to do well and to win makes everything we do worthwhile. Some of those sacrifices we make seem to spur him on.'

At the Hotel Silken Diagonal Barcelona Rea is sipping a hot Cappuccino and already warming up to the many questions that he will face in the coming three weeks until he can slip down the visor in the Phillip Island pitlane, take a breath and stop talking.

Is racing more about being a professional now rather than rabidly chasing a goal?

Not really...I enjoy achieving little things. Just riding the bike isn't so satisfying but achieving those things are great, like a fast lap-time in testing or knowing you are heading in the right direction with development. When you stop hitting those little marks then I think you stop enjoying it as much. Of course everyone falls in love with riding a bike and wants to do it at the top level but that's not the fun part for me. I think when I stop achieving goals that I have set then it won't be so much fun and it will be time to call it a day.

How is that feeling when you know you are the best in the world?

I don't think there is much change. The biggest change for me as a person wasn't winning a championship...it was more when I got married, had the kids and was generally happy.



What used to grind me was that the media throughout my career pitted-me as the kid with so much potential but with sub-par machinery. It chipped away at me until I got it off my plate. It was tough but I do feel – and how my sick brain works and perhaps it is my upbringing or Christianity – is that you can never be too good for too long. It is like you are waiting for something to happen, some bad news or an injury-

A twist of fate...

Yeah and I can already feel it; winning twice and something like twenty-three times in two seasons. It's like people are getting bored of that and that there needs to be more people in the mix. People forget that there are others in the mix! Chaz was dominant at times in 2016 and Tom the same. So the competition is healthy. I enjoy working with the factory and developing the bikes, I like the fact that engineers are hanging on your feedback and when you see something they have done works well and they realise it then it makes you even happier. I'm living the dream at the moment and the position I am in is bringing a lot of cool stuff, like riding with Clement Desalle [MXGP factory Kawasaki rider in the 2016 X-over concept]. You are not just world champion but you are doing stuff you love like going to the States and riding KLX140s with Eli Tomac [AMA Supercross athlete] and Austin Forkner [Monster Energy Pro Circuit Kawasaki rider] and doing all these cool events with people like Monster. Sometimes I need to pinch myself and I feel really blessed. When I was growing up I longed for a pair of white Alpinestars Tech 7s [motocross boots] and I'd always get some black boots or whatever my Dad could afford at the time; I was never the kid dressed in Astars or Fox. So now I get nice things and Astars send me care packages full of nice stuff or Oakley will send me boxes of roll-offs and AirBrakes [motocross goggles] and I'll take photos of them and post it. That's not because I'm bragging but it is because I feel so lucky. I do take care about sharing the good fortunes that come my way with friends or family. My

brothers have Kawasaki bikes now and all the kit and the helmets and it is great I can do that with the people close to me.



What do you fear?

I fear being lost in life. Now I have so much focus and dedication on my family and one particular thing. I think about after racing...and what purpose I'll have apart from being a husband and a father. I want to contribute to 'people' in any kind of way and right now I get that satisfaction from making good race results or improving a bike for a manufacturer or enjoying teamwork with a group of people. So I fear losing that purpose in years to come. Turning thirty and you tend to get that 'long term goal' question more. I don't want to race for a long, long time more. I have my two year deal with Kawasaki and after that we'll look into things but I don't have much control over what comes next. Since I was six years old I've dedicated my life to motorbikes whether it be motocross or road race. It's all I've known. I don't even know where I might be living in five-ten years. My wife is Australian, my kids are Manx and I'm from Northern Ireland: I don't know where life will take me.

Put to Tatia, she can see some of Jonathan's apprehension. Perhaps it is an indication of both the concentration and the stoicism required by his vocation that he does not think too much of tomorrow. 'I think he might find it more difficult than he realises,' Tatia admits. 'When he has a month off from racing he starts going 'round the bend' and I want to kick him out to do something! He will never be one of those guys just sitting at home watching bikes on TV. He is a very motivated person and if he has any time then he wants to do something with it. And the kids keep us so occupied. He'll have a lot of opportunities and it is just a matter of finding the right one because he does get bored with things very quickly. He'll be fine. He might have one or two years where he's a bit lost but it's like anything: changing jobs or moving countries. It is a transition we'll go through together but I like to think he'll have a role in racing for a long time yet as a rider, an ambassador or in-and-out of the media. He'll find his way.'

'We don't really talk about the future too much and people have asked us 'what will you do when Jake needs to go to school?' she adds. 'I just think in this world you don't think too far ahead. We do it loosely, but we don't plan 2-3-4 years, we just live for the moment and make the most of it. I would say in the last six months we've started to have our first grown-up conversations about what we want to do and where we want to live.'

With his age, his experience and now the track record it is not far fetched to talk of words like 'legacy': Rea has created his own paragraph in the chronicles of motorcycle racing and there are ripples from the milestones he has cast.

Do you have the sense you are affecting lives and having influences...?

And I have noticed it has become stronger and stronger these last two years of winning. It is probably what you notice the most. It is so easy to interact now with social media because any guy can reach out to you by hash-tagging you on Twitter or a Facebook post. You can know exactly what fans think and feel and I can honestly say it has been 90% love and 10% hate and I think that is really good figures in my direction because you cannot please everybody and I'm sure there are some that have it harder. It is super-nice. Back home I have noticed a big shift in awareness of what we are doing at the world stage. We have these Sports awards run by the Belfast Telegraph and myself and Carl Frampton [boxer] went head-to-head and he's one of the best boxers in the world. So that's cool. I enjoy meeting people. Sometimes I get creeped out if I'm just put on a stage. I'm almost anxious that I don't have a big enough personality to carry it off in front of hundreds of people like some other guys. I can get a bit weird in the spotlight. We went to the EICMA bike show in Milan just to say hello to Kawasaki and we were kinda shuffled onto the stage and it became a mass of photos and attention, like a rugby pitch where I was at the front. I felt strange because I don't think of myself in that way. I don't like to be 'celebrified' and have all that attention. Sometimes you can feel like a monkey at the zoo and not know what to do. I enjoy the small distance that social media can afford and it is weird to have someone just across the way looking and pointing rather than just coming to say hello. I had heroes when I was a boy and I went up to them and introduced myself; some were great and I was so happy and some were a bit arrogant and idiotic and you remember that for the



rest of your life. So I have to remember that also because there will be kids that look up to me and will recall if they did or didn't meet me. I saw Ryan Dungey at the FIM Awards as a peer because we were both there to pick up prizes and he was a bit strange, a bit of a recluse and completely not what I thought he'd be like. Meeting Jeremy McGrath for the first time was a case of being bowled-over: he was my childhood hero and he was such a cool guy. I was so happy to meet him because he was all – and more – than I expected him to be.

Lastly what's the definition of happiness or ecstasy for you?

[pauses] It is so difficult to really define what makes me super-happy...I don't get these massive highs any more. There's that feeling of crossing the finish line and those seconds of feeling an achievement: a real 'Yes! That's in the pocket'. Then the Parc Ferme moment is incredible: seeing these grown men ecstatic, faces lit up, hugging each other. If only you could bottle that, you could change someone's life. It is super-cool. Being announced on the podium is another nice one. I have my two world championship trophies at home and we just reminisce about what an amazing life we have right now. Those moments when you can reflect on what you have done: you cannot beat them. And there is not a lot of time to be able to sit down and do that because we are constantly travelling. I remember arriving home last year and we brought my trophy from Qatar. We had four nights there and I was sitting on the couch with Tarsh and a glass of wine and thinking 'this was an amazing year...' You remember little moments like that because in this sport you are never looking back, always forward and looking for improvement. That November night was pretty cool.







KAWASAKI
MOTORCYCLES

SBK 2017

READY?



By Kent Brockman
Photos by Steve English/GeeBee images

MXGP AND WORLDSBK THROTTLING UP WITHIN TWENTY-FOUR HOURS OF EACH OTHER: THE WEEKENDS NO LONGER SEEM SO ACTION-FREE. KENT BROCKMAN HAS BEEN ON THE CASE WITH SOME CURIOUS ISSUES AND TALKING POINTS PRIOR TO THE GRID DISPERSAL IN PHILLIP ISLAND. GET YOUR SUPERBIKE FILL HERE...

CAN WE EXPECT A GREAT SEASON?

Jonathan Rea will start the 2017 WorldSBK season as a deserved title favourite, but what can the number one plated Kawasaki man expect from the coming campaign? A much harder time is the most common expectation.

With a grid featuring six world champions, ten WorldSBK or Grand Prix race winners and a host of national Superbike champions, this is the strongest field seen in the class for years. The return of Marco Melandri and Eugene Laverty to WorldSBK and the introduction of Stefan Bradl to the series has fuelled tremendous expectation amongst fans. Do the actual riders feel the same?

'I think it's good for WorldSBK,' said Chaz Davies. 'I think that it is good having these guys coming in because I get the feeling that riders have been placed in this championship to shake it up and to kind of show WorldSBK in a different light. We've seen world champions from different categories come to the class recently. 'We've got Stefan as a former Moto2 champion, Nicky is a former MotoGP champion, Melandri won a 250GP championship. When you add in Torres who won a Moto2 race. De Rosa has won in Grand Prix and de Angelis has too - it's great to see. It doesn't matter which category you race in in MotoGP, if you're in that paddock I think you're regarded higher in that paddock than a Superbike rider. Thankfully we know different, here and we know that this championship's at a good level and that the riders are at a very, very good level.'

'It's great to see good riders come over but nothing really changes here and you've still got the same guys at the front,' he adds. 'I think that's good because it just adds credibility to the riders in this class and it doesn't take anything away from us. If somebody came in and wiped the floor with us we'd have to think that the perceptions from the GP paddock are right. But thankfully it isn't that way.'

As one of the riders to join the class in recent years, Nicky Hayden offered his perspective. 'I enjoyed last year and coming to WorldSBK,' said Hayden. 'I think this year it's shaping up to be a better series with a deeper field and more excitement. Somebody needs to get up there and beat the Kawasakis and Ducatis because nobody wants to just see the same riders winning all the races. If you just take the dry races the last three, four years the same three guys have won. Hopefully all of us can get up there and make it more exciting. I think that would be really good for the series.'

Eugene Laverty is one of the riders returning to the class after two years in MotoGP and the 13 times WorldSBK race winner is sure the championship is in a stronger position now compared to when he left it. 'I think that having the likes of Marco back is great for the championship because he is such a big name,' said Laverty. 'When he came to WorldSBK first he fought for titles as well, and after being away it's going to be interesting to see how he fares. He seems to have changed his character a little bit as well. He seems a bit more relaxed. So who knows? He could be a title contender too. But there're a lot of fast riders in there now. Last year on the Ducati there was only one rider really capable of winning, and now you've got two there so it's not going to be easy.'

As one of the national Superbike champions, Alex Lowes has seen how difficult it is to make the breakthrough on the world stage. The Yamaha rider is one of many hoping to get into the fight this year - but doesn't underestimate the challenge he faces. 'It's tough when you're not winning because everyone wants to be fighting at the front,' said Lowes. 'You need to work so hard to get your package right to do your job. I think there's lot of good riders and a lot of good bikes. So as a team we need to work hard that you can be close to the front than. I think it's never easy in a world championship and this year is going to be tough as ever I think.' Tom Sykes, the 2013 WorldSBK title winner, knows what it takes to win the crown and knows how difficult a task it will be to get back to the top of the mountain in 2017.



'I think it's going to be a strong grid straightaway,' said the Englishman. 'The two Kawasakis, two Ducatis will be quick. Obviously Marco was out of the game but he-is-who-is-he-is and he's got a great history of racing. He knows how to ride a motorcycle so I've had no surprise whatsoever that he's fast. It looks like the bike is working really well for him.'

'Outside of those four riders Yamaha seem to have extra development and they'll have less issues this year so should be strong. Nicky is a MotoGP world champion so he's strong and hopefully Honda will give him something more. Eugene was a title contender a couple years ago and is back on the same bike. It should be a strong championship. I'm looking forward to it.'

Sykes isn't the only one looking forward to the 2017 WorldSBK season; it has all the ingredients to be a classic!





GETTING TUCKED IN...

Most world-class riders fit a certain physical mould and that typically extends to being about 5'10 or smaller. Chaz Davies and Leon Camier fall considerably outside that reference with both in excess of 6ft, and with that comes inherent challenges for both men. Most racing motorcycles are small and compact, with fairings to put through them the air as efficiently as possible. Being a rider with a larger frame obviously makes it more difficult to get into the correct position on the bike to shelter from the wind and be as aerodynamic as possible.

Both Chaz and Leon have raced in 125GP, MotoGP, WorldSSP and WorldSBK and as they grew they learned to adapt and understand exactly what they need to do in order not to waste the vast amounts of money invested in airflow and shaving tenths away from a lap-time.

'It's not easy but I've done it for fifteen years now, so it has become second nature for me,' says Davies. 'You do have to work that bit harder and I think you do get penalized a little bit for being a bigger rider in terms of outright speed.'

'It's a challenge, but it's one I've been used to. You can adapt the bike to try and make it a bit easier. The bad days were when you're riding bikes and you've got no choice over what bits come on them. But the luxury of being in a factory team is they will try and find solutions to your problems. You're spoiled but it's sort of the way it needs to be to get comfortable on the bike. It's a challenge but one I'm used to.'

For the slightly taller Camier, the challenge is more extreme - but because he has been conscious of the problem he feels that he has actually made it into a strength. 'Ergonomically I think I'm pretty good,' said the MV Agusta rider. 'If you see how I get tucked in, I don't think there's anyone more out of the wind than me. That's not the problem for me. It's more trying to lower the centre of gravity because I'm a little heavier. The only time I worked on my tuck positions was when I went to MotoGP on that Honda with Aspar in 2014.'

'That bike was so small, and for some reason they didn't want to change the foot peg position on the bike. So I had to work a lot on mobility and ankle mobility basically just to fold myself into the thing. But I still managed to get tucked in really good. So that's something I've worked on a long time ago and I've always been pretty good at. I'm usually pretty comfortable when I'm in the straight but I'm always conscious of it.'

Having that flexibility is key for any rider, and the main reason that we see most of them placing more and more importance on stretching and yoga rather than lifting weights or endurance training. Davies and Camier are as supple as any athlete and it's something that Davies feels give them an advantage on the bike.

'I'm quite lucky that I am as flexible as I am,' said the Welshman. 'I can stretch and basically put my head between my knees. So I am quite flexible in that way. I can double myself over quite easily. I see some riders who are a lot shorter than me and their shoulders are sticking out into the wind on the straights. They couldn't double-over to save their lives and it shows on the bike. I think a lot of it depends on your genetics as well. It's not only flexibility but where you can bend. Some riders have got short bottom halves and long top halves or vice versa. It all makes a difference. But I think luckily for me and Leon we're both quite flexible and we can get into a good position on the bike.'

'In WorldSBK the regulations say that the fairings have to be within a certain percentage of the road bike fairing and it's difficult for the team to change much. They can't add a little bit of bodywork to the side or work on the aerodynamics - it really is what comes on the road bike plus or minus a couple of centimetres, which really don't make enough difference for a tall rider. So you really need to concentrate on being as efficient as possible.'

ALWAYS THE BRIDESMAID...??

The last three years have been challenging for Eugene Laverty. After his nine win-2013 WorldSBK campaign he was unceremoniously dumped by Aprilia and forced to pick up the pieces with an uncompetitive Suzuki. A win at the season opening race in Phillip Island sparked hopes of a strong campaign but ultimately from that point onwards the Irishman was left struggling - and finished a crash-marred campaign tenth in the standings. On the surface his time in MotoGP was scarcely better, but after two years he feels a much more complete rider and one ready to grab his opportunity on the Milwaukee Aprilia with both hands. 'I think that I've changed over the last couple of years in MotoGP,' said the Irishman. 'We've seen over the last couple of years consistency is so important in WorldSBK. It's how Johnny has won his titles. It's a long year with 26 races and it's so important to be getting to the chequered flag every race. It's not just about race wins and I think that's been the good thing about being in MotoGP.'

'On any given weekend maybe being 11th position was the best that I could achieve so being able to finish 11th was a good result for me. Accepting that was actually really good for my mindset because I was too eager to win races when I was last in WorldSBK. In 2013, in the first half of the season, I had some breakdowns and it meant that I was always playing catch-up. That caused me to start making errors at the wrong time. I think I've learned from that and what experience gives you. You learn from your mistakes, and riding around mid-pack in MotoGP's only helped that further.'

Laverty's speed has never been in doubt, and while it was masked in recent years by uncompetitive machinery he is very much a known quality in the WorldSBK paddock. His 13 race wins in the class, not to mention 12 wins over two full World Supersport campaigns, means that he'll have expectations of being competitive from the outset. He is also realistic about

the competition that he will face this year with WorldSBK in arguably its rudest state of health in recent memory.

'I think this is the best year for the championship in a long time. You've had some really great riders in there as always in WorldSBK but the machinery and factory support is returning too. Yamaha looks be coming together and getting more factory support, Honda has a new bike, Aprilia are coming back. It's always been great riders. I think they've been underestimated definitely by the outside world. They don't realize how fast the riders are here.'

With Chaz Davies and Jonathan Rea having dominated the 2016 season and taking 20 wins from the 26 races, facing up to that level of competition is daunting for most of the grid and something that Laverty isn't shying away from. Having raced against both throughout his career and known them most of his racing life, the 30 year old spoke about both rivals.

'They've moved forward in the last few years, particularly Chaz. He's a smart rider and he's kept working at it and being with the same team gives him the continuity he never had before. What Chaz did at the end of last year really raised the bar for everyone and we're going to have to fight with him. On track he's always a late braker and we're going to have to do the same if we want to be able to fight with him.'

Far from playing down expectations, Laverty is expecting to fight for the win from the opening race at Phillip Island and that confidence is shared by his team boss Mick Shanley. The Englishman said at the conclusion of the European testing programme that: 'Everybody will have strong expectations about Phillip Island for us. Eugene has always been strong at Phillip Island and the Aprilia has always had a good history there. We'll go there with a positive attitude.'

While Shanley refused to be drawn on whether the team could fight for the win, his rider had no such qualms. Laverty spoke with steely determination - full of confidence when he clearly stated his goals for the coming campaign as he seeks his first world title. 'We know how strong we can be at Phillip Island with this bike.

Leon Haslam had two podiums on the Aprilia in Thailand in 2015 and we've been strong at Aragon in the past as well, so for these first three rounds we intend to be there on the podium. I feel a lot more confidence ahead of Phillip Island after this test.'

'We've had six days on the bike and I feel that I'm riding the Pirelli tyre exactly as it needs to be ridden and also riding this bike is big too. I know exactly how the Aprilia should feel around here. When you have that experience of the bike it means that we can realistically expect to fight for wins from the off.'

SBK 2017



The 2017 season sees some significant rule changes for WorldSBK. The most high profile of these has been the switch to a shuffled grid for Race 2 that will see the podium finishers start on the third row of the grid.

The Superpole qualifying sessions will define the grid positions for Race 1 as well as the grid positions for Race 2 of riders who finish tenth or lower in Race 1. The top nine riders on the grid for Race 2 will be based upon the results of the opening race of the weekend.

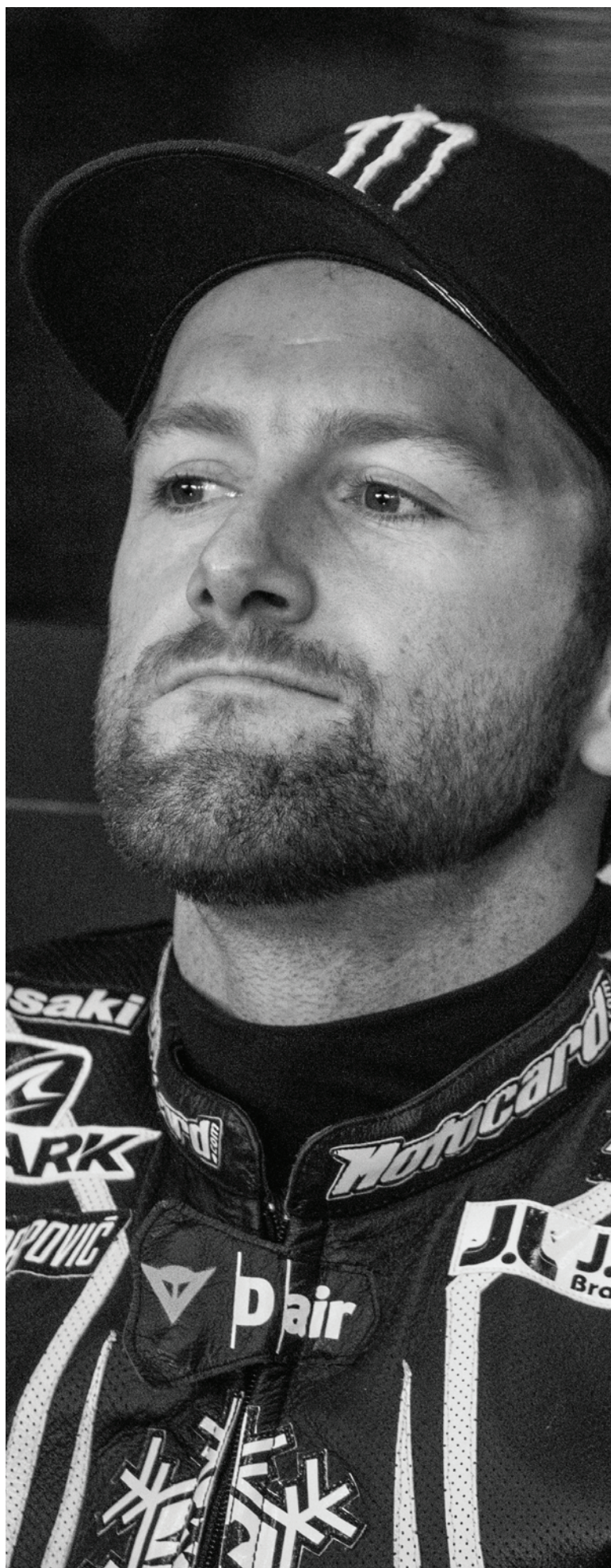
The podium finishers will start in reverse order on the third row of the grid while the finishers fourth to ninth will make up the front two rows of the grid. Superpole results will determine the starting positions for riders who finished in tenth or lower in the opening race.

The opening rounds of the year will potentially see some confusion for fans but it looks set to certainly offer a lot of excitement as the fastest riders are forced to battle through the field. In 722 WorldSBK races the winner has started from the third row of the grid or back on 59 occasions. Winning races can happen from the midfield, Noriyuki Haga achieved the feat a record nine times, but it is a huge challenge for riders. Reaction has been mostly positive from the WorldSBK grid and the opening round of this experiment at Phillip Island will certainly be hotly anticipated.

Another change for 2017 sees the banning of split throttle bodies. This will force teams to reconfigure their engines and it will lead to a much greater challenge for some riders. The split throttle bodies allowed teams to engineer their bikes so that they only opened one or two cylinders at a time in a bid to offer the rider more control in a corner.

The improved feel and smoother power delivery helped Leon Camier to some exceptional performances in 2016 but the MV Augusta rider looks set to be one of the riders most heavily punished by the change in regulations.

NEW REGS FOR '17





THE GOLDEN RULE

What's the most intriguing intra-team rivalry in WorldSBK 2017? Entering their third season it's clear that Jonathan Rea vs Tom Sykes has all the makings of a great rivalry, but given Rea's dominance it's never lived up to the hype. Chaz Davies and Marco Melandri will be interesting but we've already seen them scrap it out for team honours when they were partnered at BMW. Stefan Bradl and Nicky Hayden are both Grand Prix champions, but it will take time for Honda to develop their raw Fireblade into a consistent threat.

The Yamaha battle, on the other hand, looks poised to be a classic. Alex Lowes and Michael van der Mark have long been seen as the two top young riders in the class and now they go head to head. When the season kicks off in Australia at the end of the month it should be Lowes that has the upper hand based on his experience of the bike from 2016 - but it shouldn't take van der Mark too long to get up to speed.

The dynamic between the two riders will be a key sub plot throughout the season and just like leaves blowing in the wind there will be a force of nature, and a battle of wills, never far from the surface of the garage.

'What are our targets for this year? We want to be as close to the Kawasakis and Ducatis as possible,' said Lowes. 'The Aprilia is a championship-winning bike and will obviously be very strong also. Yamaha's target has to be to try and be considered as close with them guys rather than being nearly up there. That's what we try to achieve.'

Last year, Yamaha's return to WorldSBK was a trying campaign for the Crescent Racing-run squad. The team capped their season with Sylvain Guintoli standing on the podium at the penultimate race in Qatar, but overall it

was a disappointment. It was an injury-marred campaign for both riders, with Lowes starting the season with a badly injured shoulder that limited his running in testing to a maximum of seven laps per stint.

As a former British Superbike champion, it's been a tough three years in WorldSBK for Lowes with a trio of podiums the highlights for his efforts. Going into his second season aboard the Yamaha, he's confident that this season could see an upturn in his fortunes.



'Of course it's been tough to come here but you can't take it personally. I've learned so much since coming here and it's been clear from when I first came to WorldSBK I was fast and that I had the speed. I think that at times I haven't sort of dealt with difficulty as good as I could but I also think that's all behind me now and I'm a better person for it. I'm enjoying my riding as much as I ever have. I'm as motivated as I ever have been. I'm fit and healthy and looking forward to this year.

'The guys I work with are fantastic. I've got confidence in the crew. We work really well together. I've got a good relationship with them. We've got a couple of new guys come in the team that structurally we've got a bit more of a plan now. That obviously gives a rider confidence. So I feel confident, but I've just got to be realistic as well and take each weekend as it is and get the best result that I can.'

Having won the prestigious Suzuka 8 Hours and raced for Tech3 Yamaha as a replacement rider last year, it's clear that the factory has a lot of faith in Lowes. He will know that the first step to maintaining that faith will be to beat his new teammate.

For van der Mark, the 2017 season marks his first season not on a Honda in the WorldSBK paddock. The former STK600 and Supersport champion has a great CV and like all up and comers, the 24 year old knows that he needs to beat his teammate if he is to keep impressing. Last year saw him finish ahead of Nicky Hayden in the championship, with six podiums and a pole position the highlights of a strong campaign in what he expects to be a very competitive field.

'To be honest I think at the moment there are so many strong riders, strong bikes. It's good for the championship, but I don't know what to expect,' said the Dutchman. 'I think it will be even closer than before. I think all the teams need to make another step this year to get closer to Kawasaki and Ducati, who have been in front so much over the last few years.' Like his teammate, van der Mark brings with him a champion's mentality and having gone two years since winning in WorldSSP, he is growing impatient to taste success once again.

'I just want to win. I think the last time I won something was a karting race! For me I think our main goal is to be on the podium consistently. I think we can be there, but I just want to win. I have confidence in the team and the people around me. Obviously there's work to be done and we have to get used to each other and I also need to speak English all day but it's getting more comfortable and we're all working well together. With Alex and myself I think it's good for us to have two young riders. We're both young and we both want the same thing.'

That same thing is to win races and beat each other. It's almost time for lights out, but the fireworks from the Yamaha garage could illuminate the coming season.





MotoGP

2017 AUSTRALIA TEST
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MotoGP PHILLIP ISLAND TEST



DUEL FORMING

Photos by CormacGP, Blogs by David Emmett & Neil Morrison



MotoGP PHILLIP ISLAND TEST



Everything about this image of the Desmosedici screams 'race bike'. Jorge Lorenzo perhaps experienced his lowest moment as a Ducati rider so far with some headaches around the special Phillip Island layout trying to get his new steed turning at speed. Still some days to go yet for #99

ON THE CUSP OF GREATNESS...?

By David Emmett

With two tests in the books for the MotoGP riders, a clear pattern is starting to emerge. Marc Márquez and Maverick Viñales are a cut above the rest so far. At both Sepang and Phillip Island, Viñales had the edge on outright speed, topping the timesheets. On race pace, though, Márquez was running the kind of consistent speed usually associated with Jorge Lorenzo. If you were heading to your local bookies today, you would be putting your money down on Márquez, with a little side bet on Viñales just in case.

But while all of the attention has been on the emerging duel between the two young Spaniards, that doesn't mean we can just write off the rest of the field. If anything, the first two tests of 2017 show that the MotoGP grid has never been stronger. That is in part due to factories such as Suzuki and Aprilia closing the gap to Honda, Yamaha and Ducati. It is also in part due to the 2016 bikes filtering down to the satellite teams. Last year they were stuck with 2015 machines, designed around the Bridgestone tyres, while the 2016 bikes were designed to cope with the character of the Michelins. Then there's the arrival of arguably the best group of rookies since 2010, the year which saw riders such as Ben Spies, Marco Simoncelli, Alvaro Bautista and Aleix Espargaro enter the class.

At the opposite end of the novelty spectrum, there is Valentino Rossi. The Italian was strong in Sepang, but less impressive at Phillip Island, ending the three-day test in eleventh spot. Rossi's performance at the Island was illustrative of why you should never take testing results at face

value. While teammate Viñales was out focusing on race pace, and working on getting the best out of the rear tyre late in the race, Rossi was working through a big pile of parts, some of which worked and some of which didn't. Rossi is faster than the timesheets show, but there were also signs of weakness. Rossi looked pale and thin after an Asian tour promoting Yamaha, and was under the weather throughout the test. Yamaha team boss Maio Meregalli put that down to Rossi's age. He should be fine racing in Europe, but the three back-to-back flyaway races might take a little too much out of him.

On paper, Cal Crutchlow had the third strongest test at Phillip Island behind Márquez and Viñales. With Dani Pedrosa as third fastest overall, the Honda looks to be in good shape. They have been testing two different specs of their new Big Bang engine and did a lot of work to get the electronics clicking together at Phillip Island. The Repsol Honda team head to Jerez later this week for another test of the engine, which should set them up for the start of the season. Márquez says that Honda are in better shape now than at the start of 2016. That bodes well for everyone on an RC213V. That includes Jack Miller, who will have access to updates again, now that his former crew chief Cristian Gabarrini has moved back to Ducati.

The athlete Gabarrini has gone to help is still struggling a little to find his feet. The Ducati Desmosedici is the polar opposite of the Yamaha, and Jorge Lorenzo is having to radically reinvent his riding style. That means figuring out how to brake later and deeper into corners. The



proved tougher at Phillip Island, where there are few braking spots to speak of, and those which are tend to be very high speed. That leaves little room for working your way 'up to it': it's all or nothing. Lorenzo may be helped by Ducati's winglet replacement, which they are expected to test at Qatar. That might help keep the front wheel down at high speed, giving a bit more confidence at the first touch of the brakes.

“Satellite teams have 2016 bikes and then there's the arrival of arguably the best group of rookies since 2010...”

But Ducati still have a lot of work to do. Andrea Dovizioso was not overflowing with praise, still concerned about the inability of the GP17 to turn through fast corners. The mood of Dovizioso and Lorenzo was not helped by the fact that Alvaro Bautista was once again exceptionally quick. The Spaniard has been rapid since climbing aboard the Aspar Ducati GP16, but the factory riders have not taken kindly to being outdone by a rider on an older bike. They are perhaps giving too much credit to the machine and not enough to Bautista. Hector Barbera, the other rider with a GP16, is being outperformed by his teammate Loris Baz riding a GP15. Scott Redding, also on a GP16, is struggling in the tail end. Bautista is just riding really well. It's as simple as that.

There has been something of a turnaround at Suzuki. At Sepang, it was Andrea Iannone who was fastest, the Italian taking the lead role in the team. At Phillip Island, Alex Rins took another step forward, comprehensively outshining his teammate. It has been an impressive journey for the Spanish rookie. He lost a lot of confidence after the big crash he had at Valencia last year. He regained some of that at Sepang, but struggled on the first day at Phillip Island. Once he found his feet, Rins turned into the rider we had all thought he was: fast, confident, a natural talent. He was signed by Suzuki to be the new Maverick Viñales. Is that too much to ask? It's a little too early to tell, but things are looking good.

Rins was not the only quick rookie. Both Jonas Folger and Johann Zarco were also sprightly on the Monster Tech 3 Yamahas. At Sepang, it had been Zarco who had impressed; at Phillip Island, it was the turn of Folger. The German youngster was not just quick over a single lap, but like Zarco at Sepang, he also had solid pace. Zarco is playing to expectations in taking a steady and methodical approach to building speed. Folger has tended to be erratic, capable of winning races in Moto2, but also just as likely to finish outside the points. Perhaps he will fit into the regime demanded by MotoGP a little better. A little consistency would go a very long way for the German.

The Phillip Island test confirmed what we saw at Sepang. This is an incredibly strong field and it is getting tougher and tougher at the top. 2017 has all the makings of another classic season.





MotoGP PHILLIP ISLAND TEST



SIMMERING NICELY...

By Neil Morrison

There was a hint of it two weeks ago at Sepang: a handful of laps on track together, eyeing the other's lines, assessing the ease at which they were running and occasionally swapping places. The 'brushing it off' as little more than a bit of fun came soon after.

But under the Australian sun, after three days of tiring, incessant testing, when both men clocked 516 laps between them, there came confirmation that Marc Marquez and Maverick Viñales, the world's two fastest riders at present, are prepared to trade blows before the first flag of the year has dropped.

Sitting first and second on Friday afternoon, it was safe to assume the testing results were sufficient confirmation that 2017 could be a straight Marquez-Viñales slug. The headline times had been set. Advantage Viñales in that respect, as the Movistar Yamaha man sat 0.294s up on his countryman. Now to use the remaining hours to work on that race pace: Viñales' only facet still to be questioned. What followed was the first inkling in public that both men's competitive instincts could boil over this year.

Viñales had his attention fixed on a race simulation – his first aboard a Yamaha – to gauge how much Marquez had in hand over a succession of laps. But as Viñales picked up a rhythm, the Honda man came out of pit lane, found the M1 just ahead and held a watchful eye. Viñales made his thoughts on the matter clear that evening. "It's not normal," he said. "You are doing your race simulation. Someone pulls out. You cannot stop." The result was Viñales aborting his run. "The track is four kilometres long. It's strange that he was there, where I was."

Viñales wore a smile...but he knew what Marquez was doing. For five full laps he felt the glare of his enemy's stare. Now he was letting him know the act had only served to motivate him further. "It's nice - this motivation, this fighting. It's so nice!"

Keeping their age, their nationality – both hail from the same 380-mile stretch of land on the Catalan coast - and their driven nature in mind, it should come as no surprise that Maverick Viñales and Marc Marquez engaged in a spot of feuding. It's more the time at which it has come is. And it's the timing that suggests both men view each other as the greatest threat to that holiest of grails: the rider's title.

For his part, Marquez played the 'Who, me?' card well. "There was some gap. Then I was able to recover this gap. Then I follow him two laps. [It was] Interesting to see a different bike," he smiled. And what did you learn from Maverick, Marc? "The Yamaha is stable. Of course, he's fast." Hardly a ringing endorsement, but again, this was designed to gnaw away at his rival.

A part of Marquez's character you don't always see on camera: here he was applying pressure to see a reaction. And to let his new foe know all-too-well that he was ably following. After all, he had thrown a few light jabs back in November, joking that most MotoGP riders were taking it easy, holidaying in the Maldives – as was Viñales – while the ever-enterprising Marquez nobly took on a host of dirt-trackers at the Superprestigio. No doubt, their exchange at the Sepang test was another probe. It's just that, at that point, Viñales had nothing to lose, and wasn't in the midst of a race run.



A rider that will remain unnamed once spoke of a time he found himself on track with Marquez and Valentino Rossi at the close of the Sepang test last year. With the red flag signifying the end of the day's action, the Spaniard rode in the wheel tracks of his more experienced foe until it was time for a practice start. When Rossi stopped, Marquez pulled alongside and looked across, waiting until the Italian took off. The intention? To nag his rival, to watch the anger fester within, an anger that would ultimately lead to an early-season mistake.

“Marquez now faces a rival he can't predict. And one who isn't going away any time soon....”

Perhaps we're seeing a similar ploy here. Although there is one difference. Until now, Marquez has been the young assassin, grinning at his elders, and taking the pledge of innocence when courting controversy. Now he faces a rival with fewer years than him. One whose behaviour he can't predict. And one who isn't going away any time soon. Once Viñales had got the hang of a 260bhp MotoGP bike early into 2016, Marquez was paying close attention. In years past they both fought it out in the Catalan junior championships, with Marquez only winning on occasion. His comments after Viñales' debut win at Silverstone showed he had been listening to his every pre-race word.

This too is a new experience for Maverick. Aside from a high profile team fallout in 2012, he has rarely been outspoken in his actions or words. And he certainly hasn't had a rider of Marquez's stature exerting pressure onto his shoulders. But make no mistake he's been waiting for this moment and is surely prepared for what's ahead. “I don't want to get caught out again,” he said in January, referencing his analysis of Marquez's ominous consistency at a Valencia test in November. You can be sure he'll be studying his rival as intently as Marquez is watching him.

Last year one member of the Suzuki team privately confided that Maverick's routine when returning from pit lane included a frustrated shaking of the head when he didn't see his own name topping the timing screens. A seasoned journalist said this was often caused when he saw Marquez's name above his own. All of which suggests a mouth-watering year lies ahead.

The timing screens have shown the two men to be the pick of the field in the two tests in 2017. Viñales has been the quicker, Marquez the more consistent. But Maverick's late run was applauded by Yamaha boss Massimo Meregalli. “He did 20 laps and basically the drop was almost nothing,” he confirmed. So far, there's very little between them. For us onlookers, that first bow under the floodlights in Qatar cannot come soon enough.



MotoGP PHILLIP ISLAND TEST



A 38th birthday meant that Phillip Island was at least a memorable experience in some way for Valentino Rossi as the search for optimum set-up in 2017 continues...and as his teammate maintains his formidable streak of pace









HARLEY & FLAT TRACK IN 2017

By Andrea Wilson

Photos by Andrea Wilson/Various

THERE'S A LOT OF BUZZ AROUND AMERICAN FLAT TRACK. THE SPORT IS ENTERING A NEW GOLDEN ERA WITH A NEW NAME [FORMERLY AMA PRO FLAT TRACK], NEW CLASS STRUCTURE, NEW RULES AND RENEWED RIVALRY IN HARLEY-DAVIDSON VS. INDIAN. WHILE THE FOCUS FOR MONTHS HAS BEEN ON INDIAN'S RETURN, HARLEY-DAVIDSON RECENTLY FIRED BACK WITH THE ANNOUNCEMENT OF ITS THREE-RIDER FACTORY TEAM. WE HAD A CHAT WITH HARLEY-DAVIDSON'S GLOBAL DIRECTOR OF MARKETING SCOTT BECK TO TALK ABOUT THEIR GAME PLAN

SHARING THE TWO- WHEEL GOSPEL

The folks at Harley-Davidson bleed the blue groove. The brand has been racing for a little over a century and has a rich legacy in the sport of American Flat Track with countless wins and a part of 46 Grand National Championship titles. As with any sport's history, there are highs and lows. Harley has hung around through thick and thin when others left. Okay, it was more than 'hanging around'. You'd be hard-pressed to find anyone in the sport who would challenge the statement that if it wasn't for Harley-Davidson flat track racing would have receded into the background as a Pro/Am sport long ago. During the recent hard times, Harley was the only OEM to maintain a factory team and the only OEM to offer contingency.

Now that the sport has returned to the good times they have no plans to ease that support. In fact, they are ramping it up. 'To us flat track is the oldest, most authentic, awesome American form of racing that we've had a lot of success and experience in,' Harley-Davidson's Global Marketing Director Scott Beck said. 'So it makes sense to get our dealers enthused about it, get our HOG (Harley Owners Group) clubs enthused about it, get our riders enthused about it and riding and racing. So we're putting a lot more into activating the races in the next year. Predominantly in the U.S., the initial kind of view is to prove that we can not only draw a much more enthusiastic base of Harley folks back into the sport, but that it's the coolest thing to do on a Saturday night in America – go to the races and burn gas and oil and get a little dirty.'

Flat Track's return to the good times coincides with the return of Harley's oldest rival - Indian Motorcycles. Indian threw their hat back into the game for the first time in over fifty years

and when they returned to the playground they came in swinging. Indian swooped in and signed what many consider to be the sport's top three riders – reigning Grand National Champion Bryan Smith, three-time Grand National Champion Jared Mees and 2013 Grand National Champion Brad Baker. They also grabbed two of the top tuners as a part of the deal, Smith's new-era tuner Ricky Howerton and Mees' legendary tuner Kenny Tolbert.

It was a big statement that had everyone asking: 'What will Harley do?'

Some feared that they might shrink into the shadows, but that wasn't the case. Although it took a while for a response, it was a response in kind. But the folks in Milwaukee don't really look at it as a response.

'I guess I wouldn't characterize it as countering Indian at all,' Beck said. 'I would characterize it almost in reverse. Indian's once again imitating and flattering Harley-Davidson by trying to rip a page out of our book that hasn't missed any chapters for the last hundred plus years.'

So Harley calls dibs on the being the leader in sport and put their money where their mouth is. Harley enlisted longtime partner Terry Vance from Vance & Hines to run the operations of the Factory Flat Track team and picked up some Grand National Champions of their very own – three-time Grand National Champion Kenny Coolbeth, Jr., two-time Grand National Champion Jake Johnson and up-and-coming star Brandon Robinson.

'I couldn't be more excited to be honest with you because I've seen the success that they [Vance & Hines] have brought operationally interfacing with our product development com-

HARLEY & FLAT TRACK IN 2017



Buddy Willinski

munity in advancing performance on the track through the drag race [NHRA Pro Stock Motorcycle] side of the house,' Beck said. 'As we looked to expand our effort and to put in more resources, put more emphasis in how we compete, we were going to go with the best and that we have great, proven experience with. We feel really good about the partnership, the connection between what they bring operationally and how we work together. It's all very natural.'

They also look forward to the challenge the new year brings and pitting their factory three against Indian's trio in less than a month's time at the American Flat Track season opener on the Daytona TT.



'One thing we've learned by not being absent for fifty years and having been in the business and racing for a hundred years, is that racing is a lot better off for everybody – fans, dealers, racers, the sport – the more competitors you have out on the track,' Beck said. 'So it's a good thing that they're coming. We're excited to beat them just like we'll be excited to beat the other guys who are coming too.'

But it's more than just getting the competitive juices flowing again on track, Harley-Davidson has always been about selling more than transportation; they're selling a lifestyle. So they see value in the sport's ability to build enthusiasm for motorcycling as a whole.



'That's a big reason that we're coming back even more aggressively is because as the leader in the business we've got to grow ridership and we've got to grow the number of people riding,' Beck explained. 'To do that we've got to get people jacked-up and excited and enthused and passionate. Get the blood boiling about moto culture and the sport... That's our mission as the leader of the culture in America, we've got to fan the flames for moto culture in this country to build enthusiasm and passion and desire and interest in the sport.'

Harley-Davidson has also put some time and money into winning hearts and minds outside of the motorcycle community, a younger, hipper audience associated with things like the X Games. They set about that mission with a teaser back in 2014 an ice-racing exhibition on Harley Street 750s in the Aspen Winter X Games. It got the interest they were looking for, so they made the big push and brought flat track to the Summer X Games in 2015. Flat Track's debut in action sport's biggest stage was a big success.

‘That was a key part of our strategy to get the bright lights of X Games shining on this form of modern American gladiators going out there and duking it out on a Saturday night,’ Beck said. ‘It’s been really powerfully well-received by the X Games audience because oddly enough most of them just didn’t have that exposure because they didn’t really grow up in that moto culture. They didn’t know a lot about that form of racing.’

The X Games exposure for flat track was one of the key things that helped propel the sport forward. So, to be fair, if the X Games never happened, there might not have been a story here.



Christus ESPN

‘We went with the idea of going to X Games before we knew about what American Flat Track was doing,’ Beck said. ‘So for us it was like, we’ve got to raise visibility for the sport because anybody that’s ever been there knows how great it is. It’s spawned great careers. It’s built great legacies and great champions, particularly on Harley-Davidson. Guys that run on the MotoGP circuit started on Harleys. We were like, we’ve got to raise the visibility of this. The X Games deal became something that we were looking at. Then the AFT came in very shortly thereafter that, so we got excited about that. So it kind of happened in that order for us. What American Flat Track is doing now is what we’d hoped and wished they’d put in place several years ago.’



Christus ESPN

Growing the sport is very important for H-D, but that doesn’t mean that they’re ignoring the R&D opportunity racing brings. The ability to take some technology from the racetrack to the showroom floor. ‘Oh, yeah. I think that’s definitely one of the reasons that you race,’ Beck acknowledged. ‘If you go all the way back to the early days it was to race to prove technology, durability, reliability, innovation and that sort of thing. So we expect all of that to head full-on into everything that we do going forward. That’s part of why we race. But like I said, it’s also not the only reason. We race to inspire people and get way more involved in the culture and in the sport. So it balances all of that.’

And that R&D is even more important in 2017 as they have decided to go all-in on their next-generation liquid-cooled fuel-injected flat track racer – the XG750R. Powered by a race modified 750cc Revolution X V-Twin engine originally engineered for the Harley-Davidson Street 750, the XG750R platform was developed last year in partnership with Vance & Hines. They could’ve opted for another year of a mixed effort with the new XG and its 44-year-old-air-cooled legend – the XR750 – but they felt that they were in a good spot to fit their factory squad with their modern machine.

FEATURE

'The great work that Terry and the crew did last year at the beginning of the process of developing XG – what we had, what we knew we were working with – and the work that they did last year, it became a question of do we want to have a foot in both camps?' Beck muses. 'Was it a very strategic decision in terms of what do we want to do? We're all confident in what we've learned. We're confident in the product. The XR has proven to be... it basically defined modern dirt track. As we look for the next generation and as we look to support OE production model street platform, it just makes more sense to go all-in at this point based on the learning and based on where we are with development and where we think we're going to be competition-wise.'

Everyone's waiting with anticipation to see how the season pans out, how Harley's three will fare against Indian's three. How Harley's new production-based flat tracker will fare against Indian's purpose-built race machine, the Indian Scout FTR750. Harley wants to see itself on the leading edge of that battle, but Beck comes back to the brand's ultimate aim: helping to grow the sport of flat track and motorcycling as a whole.

'One of the big goals that we have at Harley is what I alluded to earlier about creating a racing for ridership,' Beck said. 'So a big part is to bring Harley dealers en masse to the track. And to bring people who have known about it (flat track), but haven't engaged in it as much over the last years. So you'll see a big effort on our part. Get people energized through our dealerships, through our customer base, to really fill up the grand stands, put their eyeballs on social, watch it on television, and just get energized about this sport again because that's what's going to be contagious and that's what's going to get motorcycling where we need it to go.'

With 650 dealerships in the U.S. and a large contingent of Motorcycle Owners groups, Harley-Davidson has quite the audience to draw from.





HARLEY & FLAT TRACK IN 2017





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Monster Energy girls
by Monster Energy







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'On-track Off-road' is a free, bi-weekly publication for the screen focused on bringing the latest perspectives on events, blogs and some of the very finest photography from the three worlds of the FIM Motocross World Championship, the AMA Motocross and Supercross series' and MotoGP. 'On-track Off-road' will be published online at www.ontrackoffroad.com every other Tuesday. To receive an email notification that a new issue available with a brief description of each edition's contents simply enter an address in the box provided on the homepage. All email addresses will be kept strictly confidential and only used for purposes connected with OTOR.

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Thanks to www.mototribu.com

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Cover shot: Romain Febvre by Yamaha Racing

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